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Gates calls time on PC passwords

Microsoft is planning to end the use of passwords for computer security. Bill Gates has revealed that the company plans to introduce a technology called Infocard when it finally ships Windows Vista later this year. He made the announcement in a speech at the RSA Conference 2006 in California.

Infocard will work with Internet Explorer 7 on Windows Vista, Windows XP Service Pack 2 and Windows Server 2003 Service Pack 1 and R2. Under the new system users will have different cards for different levels of security, which means they won't have to expose their most sensitive authorisation credentials when performing less-important tasks.

"You don't always want to present all your information," said Gates. "You'll have different cards: cards that just give your location, cards that are more secure that give your credit card [details], and cards that you would protect very carefully and even have a PIN for," he said. The latter type of card could authorise access to medical information and other sensitive data.

**"Password systems
simply won't cut it...
They're very quickly
becoming the weak link"**

Bill Gates

Microsoft first mentioned Infocard last May when it released code to third-party developers, but Gates's speech included the first public demonstration of the technology. Using Internet Explorer 7, which is in beta, he rented a car over the web. When he accessed the car company's site, Internet Explorer's address bar turned green, indicating that the vendor is "protected by a High Assurance Certificate". This is part of a related security technology Microsoft is backing to help stop people mistakenly revealing their personal details to fake sites.

Then, rather than asking a user to fill in a form with their details manually, the browser displays an Infocard button. Clicking on the button opens a window that displays various Infocards with different collections of personal data on them. In the demonstration, Gates selected an Infocard he had created earlier that contained limited personal details such as his name, email address and telephone number. He managed to log into the site with just a few mouse clicks.

When it came to booking a car with a member's discount – a process that requires details that can be hard to remember, such as a membership number, type of membership and expiry date – Gates used a different Infocard that the vendor had issued previously. By using this he completed the transaction.

"Today, we're using password systems, and password systems simply won't cut it," said Gates. "In fact, they're very quickly becoming the weak link. This year, there was a significant rise in phishing attacks, where sites that pretend to be legitimate get somebody to enter

their password and then use that to create exploitive financial transactions," he said.

Gates pointed to initiatives by companies and governments to create smart cards for their employees and citizens, which they can use in a variety of different situations. Combined with Infocard software, these cards could be used for a wide range of purposes, submitting only relevant sets of data as the circumstances demand.

Gates said that Microsoft is working with its partners to develop an Identity Metasystem, which he described as "a way users and sites can more safely and privately exchange personal identity information across the internet." The Infocard provides a way for an individual to use this infrastructure.

"The Identity Metasystem addresses the fundamental need for a platform-independent identity architecture for the internet," said Lawrence Lessig, professor of law at Stanford Law School and founder of the Centre for Internet and Society. "It insulates consumers and businesses from the intricacies of the numerous individual identity systems that are in use today, and provides a much-needed framework for information to be shared more easily and securely online."

The Infocard initiative is Microsoft's second attempt to create a personal authentication framework. The first one, Passport, was launched in 1999 but failed to take off because Microsoft's credibility as a custodian of personal data was damaged by a wave of security breaches that affected both Windows and Internet Explorer. Third-party companies were reluctant to sign up for Passport too, because that would have involved handing customer data and security control to Microsoft, an aggressive competitor.

Gates acknowledged that Microsoft would have to struggle to establish its new security technology. "I don't pretend that we are going to move away from passwords overnight, but over three or four years, for corporate systems, this change can and should happen," he added.



▲ Bill Gates outlined his secure online authentication system at the RSA Conference 2006 in California

Dell to load Google software on new PCs

Dell is to load Google software on all its PCs in a deal that threatens Microsoft's dominance of the PC desktop. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the two firms struck the deal last summer when Dell invited bids from internet and media companies for the right to preload software on its PCs. As the world's largest PC vendor, Dell has great influence over what software new PC users first encounter.

Google outbid Microsoft and Yahoo! for the privilege, and now Dell PCs will come with Google software installed, which will almost certainly include Google Pack, a collection of utilities the company launched in February as a single downloadable package. Google Pack includes Google's Desktop, Earth, Picasa, Toolbar and Screensaver software. The company's new PCs will also have third-party software, including the Firefox web browser with built-in Google Toolbar, Lavasoft's anti-spyware utility Ad-Aware SE and Symantec's Norton AntiVirus 2005.

Research has shown that people overwhelmingly stick with the applications and services they first encounter, and rarely revise their choices. Microsoft has used its Windows monopoly to promote Internet Explorer and its MSN services as default choices on the



▲ Dell's plan to ship PCs with Google software threatens to break Microsoft's desktop dominance, as users tend to stick with the software they first use

PC. In the 1990s it strong-armed PC vendors into preloading its own Internet Explorer web browser and not including the then-dominant browser Netscape Navigator, which quickly faded away. To complete the job, Microsoft folded Internet Explorer into Windows, which in turn led to antitrust legal battles. These lawsuits have made Microsoft unable to prevent Dell signing such a deal with Google.

Dell has already shipped PCs with a default web address that points to a joint Dell and Google site. Google has also signed deals with HP and Sun to ship PCs preloaded with its search toolbar, and made an agreement with Firefox – a program that accounts for around 10 per cent of PC

browsers – to include a built-in Google search button.

However, the Dell deal is more wide-ranging. Some analysts have pointed to Google's deal with Sun to co-develop and promote Sun's free OpenOffice productivity suite, a direct alternative to Microsoft's Office. It has been suggested that Google will bundle OpenOffice on Dell PCs or create links to a web-based version, posing a threat to Microsoft's desktop hegemony.

"It's all about going back to Google," said US analyst Charlene Li of Forrester Research. "If you use the toolbar, you're using Google search. If you're using desktop search, it makes you loyal to Google. If you use chat, it goes back to Gmail."

Search engines "a human rights disgrace"

US politicians tore into senior executives from Yahoo!, Microsoft, Google and Cisco for their roles in suppressing dissent in China, during a heated hearing of the Senate House International Relations Committee.

"Your abhorrent actions in China are a disgrace," said Representative Tom Lantos, senior Democrat on the Committee. "I simply don't understand how your corporate leadership sleeps at night," he said.

"Cooperation with tyranny should not be embraced for the sake of profits," said Chris Smith, the Republican chairman of the House sub-committee on global human rights, while Republican senator Jim Leach accused Google of behaving like "a functionary of the Chinese government... This is astonishing," he added.

Lantos grilled Yahoo! executives on its role in the arrest of Chinese journalist Shi Tao. Yahoo! was widely criticised for having helped police identify and convict him after he had criticised human rights abuses in China.

The US companies tried to defend their decisions to do business in China, where they have to cooperate with the government's strict censorship of the internet. "[This is] not something we did enthusiastically or something we're proud of at all. [But] we have begun a path that we believe will ultimately benefit our users in China," said Google's vice-president of global communications and public affairs, Elliot Shrage.

Microsoft's associate general counsel, Jack Krumholtz, claimed that doing business in China would ultimately help its population.

"We think the benefits far outweigh the downside, in terms of promoting freedom of expression," he said. Yahoo! senior vice-president and general counsel, Michael Callahan, claimed that "these issues are larger than any one company or any one industry. Yahoo! cannot take this on by itself. We ask for the government's help," he said.

Yahoo! issued a press release to explain its position. "Private industry alone cannot effectively influence foreign government policies on issues like the free exchange of ideas, maximum access to information, and human rights reform, and we believe continued government-to-government dialogue is vital to achieve progress on these complex political issues," it said.

STOP PRESS

Microsoft unveils Vista versions

Microsoft has officially announced details of the new versions of Windows Vista after accidentally leaking the information on to the internet a week earlier.

There will be five versions of Windows Vista, two for businesses and three for home users, and all will be available in 32- and 64-bit versions. Business users can choose between Windows Vista Business and Windows Vista Enterprise. Both are designed to allow IT staff to administer them remotely, and the Enterprise version has everything that's included in Windows Vista Business along with hardware-based encryption.

Home users can choose from Windows Vista Home Basic, Windows Vista Home Premium and Windows Vista Ultimate. Microsoft claims that Windows Vista Home Premium will be more secure and reliable than Windows XP. It will feature the Aero interface, which we looked at in the December 2005 issue of *Shopper*. It will also support Tablet PC features and be able to perform similar tasks to a Windows XP Media Center PC.

Tablet features will make Windows Vista easier to use on compatible mobile computers, as it supports handwriting recognition. Media Center features include the ability to record TV, including high-definition TV (HD TV), as well as integration with Microsoft's Xbox 360 games console.

Windows Vista Home Basic is designed for less demanding users, and will be suitable for those who want to use the internet to send email and access the web. It will also be capable of normal home office tasks, but will lack the Aero interface and other advanced features available in Windows Vista Home Premium. Parental controls and other security features will also be included.

Windows Vista Ultimate is a combination of Windows Vista Home Premium and Windows Vista Business. It will include all the features from both versions.

Microsoft made the announcement a week after it posted the information on its website for a single day, before removing it again. By then a number of websites, including www.windowsitpro.com, had already copied the page and republished the details.

IN BRIEF

»» **LENOVO LAUNCHES OWN-BRAND PCs**

PC manufacturer Lenovo is to begin selling a range of PCs and notebooks under its own brand name. This is the first time the company has put its own label on its products, and the move is a step towards being recognised as a world player like Dell or HP.

In the past the Chinese firm has been an OEM for other brands, but its international profile leapt after it acquired the IBM PC division in 2004. Since then, Lenovo has traded under IBM's well-respected brand name, but it now hopes to elevate its own.

The new Lenovo 3000 product lines are going to be aimed at small businesses and consumers, while the IBM brand will cater for the company's corporate customers.

»» **GOOGLE DEBUTS WEB CREATION TOOL**

Google has introduced a do-it-yourself website builder feature. The initiative, known as Google Page Creator, attempts to simplify the creation of web pages with minimal knowledge of HTML. It allows non-techies to set up a website as quickly as possible.

The service, for which users must have a Gmail account, provides a simple template with sections for heading, subheading and body copy. Google also provides 41 different background styles for users to choose from.

As part of the package, Google is also offering a free web hosting facility. Once you have published the page it becomes available at yourdomain.googlepages.com. Google offers a one-click button to "tell your friends" about your site.

»» **GOOGLE LOSES IMAGE BATTLE**

The 'natural model' site Perfect 10 has won its legal battle against Google over the search engine's use of thumbnail images from its site. A judge in California has ruled that Google infringed Perfect 10's copyright on the pictures by taking copies and storing them on its own servers.

Perfect 10 had claimed that Google was damaging its business by freely distributing the pictures it was trying to sell. Google claimed that displaying thumbnail versions of the images constituted fair use.

EC's dispute with Microsoft escalates

Microsoft and the European Commission (EC) are heading for a showdown in their six-year battle over how the software company has abused its monopoly position.

In December the EC said it was not satisfied Microsoft had met the demands of the antitrust ruling it made in March 2004. The EC said the firm had not provided "complete and accurate" documentation that would enable competitors to make their servers work properly with Windows PCs.

Independent expert Professor Neil Barrett condemned the information Microsoft had made available to third-party server vendors, describing it as "unfit at this stage for its intended purpose".

Non-compliance with the ruling could trigger daily fines of up to €2 million (around £1.4m) per day, backdated to mid-December 2005. In March 2004, the EC fined Microsoft \$613 million (around £353m) for monopolistic practices.

But Microsoft charged the EC with ignoring the work it had done "in its haste to attack the

company's compliance". The company submitted a 75-page document on 15th February, just hours before the EC deadline to answer its charges, in an attempt to stave off new fines.

"The Commission waited many months before informing Microsoft that it believed changes were necessary to the technical documents, and then gave Microsoft only a few weeks to make extensive revisions," read Microsoft's document. "When the Commission issued its Statement of Objections on 21st December 2005, the Commission and its experts had not even bothered to read the most recent version of those documents, which Microsoft had made available on 15th December 2005."

Microsoft claims it has done enough by offering to show competitors portions of source code, but critics claim that without adequate documentation, it is an empty gesture. Open-source developers allege that Microsoft's terms for getting access to the code would make them liable to be sued

under copyright law. Microsoft maintains it spent 30,000 man hours producing 12,000 pages of documentation, and had promised prospective licencees 500 hours of free technical support.

Microsoft's critics are not impressed with these claims. "We now have to conclude that Microsoft never had any intention of complying with the antitrust ruling," said Georg Greve, president of the Free Software Foundation Europe (FSFE). "We were forced to witness years of delays, stalling and playing for more time during which Microsoft has made no attempt to allow interoperability and competition with its competitors, including Free Software such as Samba."

Observers have warned that Microsoft's escalation of the dispute could harm the company, and EC would not prove as easy to deal with as the US Department of Justice under the Bush administration. "The credibility of the Commission is at stake," said Thomas Vinje, a partner at the Brussels-based law firm Clifford Chance.

Amazon takes on iTunes

Amazon (www.amazon.com) is preparing to launch an online movie download service this spring and is expected to take a direct shot at Apple's iTunes with the launch of a music download service later this year.

Amazon may once have been the poster child for online commerce, but it is in danger of being eclipsed by iTunes as the world's leading internet retailer. "They realise that a very significant percentage of their sales are in physical media products that will almost certainly migrate to digital," said Citigroup analyst Mark Mahaney. "The writing has been on the wall for a long time, and Amazon knows that," he added.



▲ Amazon's plans to provide downloads of the latest films and music will bring it head to head with iTunes

Catching up with iTunes and other download sites in a very tough market will not be easy, though, even for a company with Amazon's strong brand name and customer base of over 55 million regular shoppers worldwide.

Details of its strategy appear to vary depending on who you talk to. "Music industry executives" told the *New York Times* that Amazon will launch a music subscription service similar to the sort of setup companies such as RealNetworks and Napster offer, which have so far failed to do that well. But industry sources told *Variety* and the *Wall Street Journal* that Amazon will combine its existing system of posting physical copies of music CDs and movie DVDs with downloading, enabling it to use its position as a major vendor of CDs and DVDs in its move into digital downloads. If you buy a music CD online, you will also be permitted to download it. Amazon will need to go much further if it is to compete with the slick customer experience found in the combination of iTunes and the iPod. This is something Microsoft and its hardware and online music partners have found difficult to challenge.

The *Wall Street Journal* said that Amazon has decided to produce its own branded music player, and the company is already in negotiations with consumer electronics companies to develop it. Amazon sells one tenth of all music players bought in the US, making it one of the iPod's biggest resellers.

iPod nano under legal pressure

Apple faces a series of legal actions that allege the firm has shipped faulty products and may even be breaking US antitrust legislation.

The iPod nano's widely reported vulnerability to scratches has prompted a lawsuit that demands Apple replace the devices. The 19-page suit was filed in San Mateo, California, by the Foundation for Taxpayer and Consumer Rights (FTCR), which describes itself as a "non-profit, non-partisan consumer watchdog group [that] fights corrupt corporations and crooked politicians". The group is incensed that "Apple is refusing to give refunds to purchasers who bought the defective product, while forcing others to pay a \$25 (around £14) fee to get a replacement that is supposed to be 'free' under Apple's warranty."

The FTCR suit alleges the nano is flawed, as "merely carrying the device in a pocket, a use expressly advertised by Apple, causes cracks, streaks, scratches and scuffs that make text displayed on the screen difficult to read or illegible. The cracks, scratches and scuffs negate the aesthetic features and benefits upon which Apple based its marketing of the product."

"Selling 'cool' stuff isn't 'cool' if the stuff doesn't work as advertised and Apple fails to comply with its obligations under its warranty and California laws," said FTCR lawyer Harvey Rosenfield. "Like every industry, Apple must fix products that are defective for free, and refund the costs incurred by its customers."

"We sent Apple a letter asking that they acknowledge and remedy the problem," said Bruce Simon, co-lead counsel in the case. Apple's lack of response led the FTCR to start legal proceedings. This is the 13th case against Apple since the nano's launch, but sales do not seem to have suffered. Apple sold 14 million iPods in the last quarter of 2005; the nano is believed to be its best-selling model.

However, the FTCR suit hits on what could be a more pressing problem for Apple. Customers who bought an iPod are likely to have downloaded music from Apple's iTunes service. They could then be stuck with an unsatisfactory MP3 player, "because abandoning the defective product would leave nano purchasers unable to use songs they have downloaded... that may only be played on the iPod portable device".



▲ Apple has faced 13 lawsuits since it launched the iPod nano

This echoes allegations made in January in another suit against Apple. Californian Thomas Slattery sued Apple on the grounds that it "unlawfully bundled, tied, and/or leveraged its monopoly in the market for the sale of legal online digital music recordings to thwart competition in the separate market for portable hard drive digital music players, and vice versa".

On 7th February a US judge ruled that Slattery's case "met all requirements for asserting the [iTunes and iPod] tying claim". Judge James Ware said Apple's 80 per cent plus shares in the US music download and music player markets meant Apple could be violating the Sherman Antitrust Act.

NTL trials 100Mbit/s internet

NTL is running trials of a broadband service that promises download speeds roughly 10 times as fast as its current 10Mbit/s premium service and 50 times faster than BT's quickest service. The cable firm was tight-lipped over exactly when it would introduce its 100Mbit/s service, or what it would cost, but reports suggest that the trials have been successful and that a product should appear late this year.

Broadband services that offer sustained downloads with even a theoretical ceiling of 100Mbit/s (around 12MB/s) will open a new world of possibilities in home entertainment, videoconferencing for home users and even areas such as home security.

With such download speeds it will be possible to stream high-definition TV (HD TV) signals to

the much-anticipated generation of PC-based media hubs, which in turn could change the economics of broadcasting.

The underlying technology behind the speed boost is called ADSL2+, but this supports 100Mbit/s downloads over only short distances. NTL said this shouldn't matter as 95 per cent of its customers live one kilometre or less from its high-speed backbone.

"The trials are to determine the technological potential of these next-generation broadband services and evaluate the operational benefits of ADSL2+," said an NTL spokesman. "Our fibre-rich network means that we have the potential to provide customers with multiple services through a single high-speed IP connection." NTL is already testing HD TV on its network.

NTL declined to say what upload speeds such a service would offer. These are slower than download speeds and, as the popularity of file-sharing programs such as BitTorrent increases (see page 214), many consider upload speeds a bottleneck.

This could be very important if NTL's joint technical trial with BitTorrent is successful. Although people widely use BitTorrent to share video content without the permission of copyright holders, NTL believes it has great potential for commercial services.

"As the world's leading P2P application, we are engaging artists and ISPs to build a consumer-friendly ecosystem around our protocol that allows all involved to benefit from P2P," said BitTorrent president Ashwin Navin.

IN BRIEF

EPSON SUES UK INK CARTRIDGE COMPANY

Seiko Epson is embarking on legal action against UK ink cartridge seller Medea International, which sells what it claims are Epson-compatible cartridges.

Epson says Medea International's Inkrite PhotoPLUS cartridges contain technologies that infringe some of its UK patents. According to Epson the spongeless valve design used in InkRite cartridges is similar to Epson's patented invention, known as Epson Smart Valve Technology.

Epson has also taken issue with Medea International's public statements regarding the patent status of its InkRite cartridges. In an article on digital camera website www.ephotozine.com, Richard Gaughan of Medea International is quoted as saying: "All users can have peace of mind that these products do not infringe any OEM patents, and in fact are patented in their own right. Inkrite PhotoPLUS should not be considered a 'compatible' product. It is in fact a totally new product and cannot be compared to anything else on the market."

MPA DECAPITATES FILE-SHARING SERVER

Police and prosecutors in Belgium and Switzerland have shut down Razorback2, the largest eDonkey P2P server. The server had indexed around 170 million files, which as many as 1.3 million users were sharing simultaneously. According to figures from the movie industry pressure group the Motion Picture Association (MPA), most of these users were based in Europe.

"This is a major victory in our fight to cut off the supply of illegal materials being circulated on the internet via peer-to-peer networks," said MPA chairman Dan Glickman. "By shaving the illegal traffic of copyrighted works facilitated by Razorback2, we are depleting other illegal networks of their ability to supply internet pirates with copyrighted works, which is a positive step in our international effort to fight piracy."

Swiss police arrested the site's operator at home while Belgian police seized its servers from an internet hosting center in Zaventem, Brussels. The MPA said that since November 2004, authorities have closed all the major eDonkey servers in the US and, with this action, Europe.

IN BRIEF

» HACKING ATTACK TESTS US DEFENCES

For a week in February the US came under a simulated cyber attack. The exercise, known as Cyber Storm, was intended to test the US's defences in response to a full-scale cyber attack by hackers.

The main aim was to discover how well the US is able to respond, not only to attacks on military and other security services, but also against energy, information technology, telecommunications and transport infrastructures.

One scenario simulated an incident where an electricity company's computer system is compromised and causes disruption to the national grid.

The federal government examined the speed and effectiveness of its response, the co-ordination between different agencies and recovery times. The exercise involved federal, state and local governments, national and international agencies and private companies.

The Department for Homeland Security, which coordinated the exercise, says the operation was hypothetical, was not intended as a forecast of a future terrorist threat and had no effect on the internet as a whole.

» SOPHOS DETECTS FIRST OS X WORM

Security specialist Sophos has reported what it says is the first OS X worm.

The OSX/Leap-A worm spreads via the iChat instant messaging application, forwarding itself as a file called latestpics.tgz, which masquerades as a collection of screenshots of OS X 10.5.

The file is sent to contacts on the infected users' buddy list. When the archive file is opened it disguises its contents with a JPEG icon in an attempt to convince people that it is harmless.

The worm uses the text 'oompa' as an infection marker in the resource forks of infected programs to prevent it from reinfesting the same files, but doesn't appear to do any damage.

Resource forks are largely a legacy from OS 9, which suggests that few files on up-to-date systems will be infectable.

Graham Cluley, senior technology consultant for Sophos, which makes anti-virus software for OS X, said that Mac users should no longer think that they don't have to worry about viruses.

Robot runs on slime

Scientists at the University of Southampton and in Japan have jointly developed a robot whose movements are controlled by light-sensitive, slimy mould.

The slime-bot project's progress was first announced at the Second International Workshop on Biologically Inspired Approaches to Advanced Information Technology, hosted in Japan in January.

The project uses what *New Scientist* describes as a "bright yellow slime mould that can grow to several metres in diameter", called *Physarum polycephalum*. This is used to pilot a spider-like, six-footed robot. The single-celled organism is repelled by light and the team used this response to trigger the movement of the robot so they could control its location using sources of light.

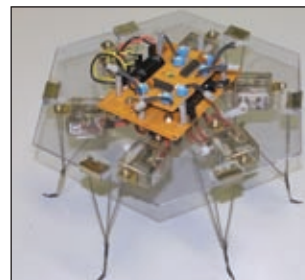
The slime was cultivated in a six-pointed star shape on top of a circuit, which was connected

wirelessly to the six-footed robot. The circuit detected any movement by the slime as it retracted from a light source and transmitted this information to the robot, which moved accordingly.

The scientists plan to produce a version of the robot with the slime placed on top, removing the wireless connection. Shining light directly at the robot should cause it to scuttle off.

Ultimately, the robot could be miniaturised and the slime's properties used to direct thousands of tiny components that otherwise would be impossible to control. "On the nanoscale, we have to learn how to work with autonomous components," said Klaus-Peter Zauner, a University of Southampton scientist. "We have to let molecules do what they naturally do," he told *New Scientist*.

Harnessing the power of biological organisms to robotics is a growing area of research.



▲ The six-footed robot developed by researchers is controlled by light-sensitive, slimy mould

Robotics researchers at the University of West England in Bristol recently created the EcoBot, a self-sufficient robot. The EcoBot II powered itself by digesting flies in microbial fuel cells with bacteria that break down sugars in the insects, releasing electrical current.

Making a robot that's able to feed itself is a holy grail in robotics research, as scientists continue to examine ways to create machines that can fend for themselves.

Online game in gay controversy

The world of sexual politics and the fantasy World of Warcraft (WOW) collided when the game's vendor Blizzard tried to block a female player from setting up an in-game guild that was "LGBT (lesbian gay bisexual transgendered) friendly".

World of Warcraft has over five million active subscriptions, which makes it one of the most popular in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) genre. Players often set up or join 'guilds', in which groups of players combine the talents of their characters.

Blizzard objected when WOW player Sara Andrews announced that she was founding a gay-

friendly guild. The company told her that other players might be offended and threatened to block her account if she persisted. Blizzard has already banned 25,000 people from playing, mostly for cheating.

"While some language in and of itself may not be offensive, it may incite certain responses in other players that will allow for discussion that we feel has no place in our game," Blizzard warned her.

As the news of Blizzard's stance was relayed across WOW forums, the company was accused of homophobia. Gay players even organised virtual pride marches down the streets of World of

Warcraft. Blizzard then announced a change of heart and offered Andrews its apologies.

"The action that was taken... was an unfortunate interpretation of our current policies, which are currently under review," said Thor Biafore, Blizzard's worldwide head of customer service.

Online gaming seems likely to become the focus of the kind of debates on sexuality that affect the real world. At the world's first Sex in Video Games Conference earlier this year, Evergreen Events' president Suzanne Freyjadis-Chuberka said that this year will see the launch of dozens of "wildly multiplayer online erotic games", as she termed them.

AIBO to be put down

AIBO, the robot dog that walks, barks and listens to commands, is to be put to sleep by Sony. The entertainment giant is dropping a range of products, which also includes the human robot Qrio, as part of a reorganisation that is designed to slash costs and will cut 10,000 jobs.

First launched in 1999, the AIBO was the first toy to bring artificial intelligence into the living room. Each robot dog learned new

tricks and gradually developed its own personality by reacting to its owners. It chased toys around the house without scratching the furniture and didn't require feeding or run up vet bills. By inserting different Sony Memory Sticks, owners could change the mood or abilities of their robot pet. As the line developed, the AIBO's vocabulary reached 1,000 words. Its head includes a video camera that can transmit images to a PC

wirelessly, so you can see life from a dog's-eye level.

Although more than 150,000 units were sold, despite costing several thousand pounds when they were first launched, AIBO was never a huge seller. However, the robo-dogs have a cult following who hold conventions in the digital equivalent of Crufts.

Sony said it will honour the seven-year service and support warranty that comes with each AIBO. It will continue to sell AIBOs at www.sonymstyle.com until stocks run out.